

Does Agent-Causation Theory Explain Free Agency?

Xu Xiangdong

(Institute of Foreign Philosophy, Peking University)

Elsewhere I have shown that agent-causation approach to free agency recently advocated by Timothy O'Connor and Randolph Clarke provide no convincing account of free agency, or that this kind of approach would be incoherent if it was to say something interesting about free agency.¹ In this paper, I will not repeat my arguments against this kind of approach which I have developed in those works. I will instead focus on another similar attempt put forward by E. J. Lowe.² I will show that Lowe's arguments for libertarian free agency on the basis of his theory of agent-causation and personal agency are by and large unsuccessful. If I am correct, no approach of this kind is adequate for making sense of our free agency. In fact, so long as an agent-causation theorist had been preoccupied with a libertarian conception of free will, it would be impossible for him to work out any reasonably acceptable account of our free agency, as I will once again show in the paper.

As far as I can see, Lowe's argument for libertarian free agency is based on three claims.³ First, agent-causation is more fundamental than event-causation. In fact, on his view, agent-causation is not only conceptually but also ontologically prior to event-causation. Second, free actions are completely uncaused—but they need not on that account be deemed to be merely random or chance occurrences. Third, a rational agent's reasons for action are never causes of the agent's actions. This paper is thus divided into four sections: each one in the first three sections is devoted to examining each claim advanced by Lowe. In the final section, I will, on the basis of my discussion, attempt to offer some suggestions about how free agency should be conceived.

I

Following Lowe's lead, in speaking of causation, I will be only talking about singular causation without inquiring the question of whether any singular causation must be backed up by some law, no matter whether we take a law to possess some necessitating effect. In other words, just as Lowe, I will completely satisfy myself with some intuitive understanding of the notion of causation without going deep into more details of the metaphysics of causation.⁴ A singular event-causation can be

¹ Xiangdong Xu, *Making Sense of Free Will* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), especially chapter 8, and Xiangdong Xu (2007), "On the Incoherence of Agent-Causation Theory", *Mind and Computation*, Vol.1: 46-69. I say that this kind of approach is incoherent mainly in the sense that any plausible understanding it can offer of free agency is acceptable to many compatibilists, or even relies on some compatibilist account of free agency. For O'Connor's theory, see Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); for Clarke's theory, see Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Account of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² E. J. Lowe, *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ Cf. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 2.

⁴ I have in some detail dealt with the metaphysics of causation in my *Making Sense of Free Will*, chapter 5.

formulated as, for example, “The explosion of the bomb caused the collapse of the bridge”. However, Lowe rejects this kind of approach to causation on the ground that events are causally impotent since causings, on his view, are a species of doings, or a species of actions in a broad sense of this notion. An event cannot be regarded as a cause because an event cannot do anything. By contrast, if only individual substances can be said to do something because they possess various properties, especially certain causal powers and liabilities they do have, it follows that only individual substances can be properly said to be causes of whatever have happened. For instance, in the example above mentioned, we should instead say that the bomb caused the collapse of the bridge, or that the bomber caused the collapse of the bridge if the agent in question was a human agent. If the notion of agent can be in a broad sense taken to include any individual substance possessing causal powers and liabilities, then Lowe’s view is simply that only agents are causes. Lowe does not deny that events may be said to be causes, and yet he insists that events can be said to be causes at best only in a loose and derivative sense. According to Lowe, every singular event-causal sentence is in fact analyzable into an existentially quantified agent-causal sentence. Such an analysis may take the following form:¹

- (I) Event *c* caused event *e* if and only if there was some agent, *A*, and some manner of acting, *X*, such that *c* consisted in *A*’s *X*ing and *A*, by *X*ing, caused *e*.

For example, the singular event-causal sentence that the explosion caused the collapse of the bridge can be analyzed into the agent-causal sentence that some agent (or some bomb), by exploding, caused the collapse of the bridge.

Why does Lowe hold that agent-causation is both conceptually and ontologically primitive? Before answering the question, let me indicate a relevant point in the first place. An event cannot merely be understood as an occurrence in some specified spatial-temporal region if we need to distinguish an event from another one. If it is proper to say of an event that it caused another event, we have to say that it caused the latter event *because of* some property (properties) it instantiated. In this way an event may be construed as the instantiation of a certain property by something in some specified spatial-temporal region.² Of course, if properties are not free-standing, that is to say, if any property must reside in some individual substance so that it is to exist or to be actualized, it is natural to say, for example, that it is because the bomb possessed the property of bringing about explosion that it caused the collapse of the bridge. It is true that the property of bringing about explosion may be embodied in different things, for example, in normal bomb or in nuclear bomb. However, I don’t think it quite necessary in attempting to explain why the bridge collapsed to say that some agent (or some substance), by acting in some manner, caused the collapse of the bridge. In fact, if we need to go on to ask why the agent (or the substance) acted in the

¹ Cf. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 136.

² Here I will not consider the possibility that something can instantiate many different properties at the same time. In this case we may adopt a more fine-grained notion of individuation with regard to an event. But this will not influence my argument.

manner which it did, we will have to say that it is because it possessed some specified property that it acted in that manner. It follows, in my view, that what figure in a singular causal relation are some causally relevant properties, which are indeed instantiated or embodied in two things or events that are, or can be taken to be, causally related. A bomb might not have caused a bridge to collapse if the bridge had been strong enough to resist the bomb's power of explosion. Here I am not denying that substances can serve as causes. What I want to emphasize is instead that if substances can serve as causes, it is because they have possessed some causally relevant properties with regard to whatever occurred as effects. In other words, I take it to be among our intuitive conception of singular causation that A causes B to bring about some change in virtue of some causally relevant properties which they possess or instantiate, where A and B may be substances.¹ Put this in another way, we may say that A's instantiation of property P at t_1 and in some given circumstance caused B's instantiation of property Q at t_2 , where A and B can be, though need not to be, the same substance. Given the account, neither agent-causation nor event-causation is fundamental in the causal structure of the world—it is some underlying properties that constitute the foundation of causal changes and causal interactions. It seems that Lowe can accept the interpretation of singular causation I just offered since he occasionally mentions that we may attempt to analyze agent-causation in terms of event-causation in this way:²

- (II) Agent A caused event e if and only if: (1) there was some event, x, such that x involved A and x caused e, (2) x involved A just in case x consists in some change in one or more of the properties of A.

Here it does not matter whether the properties in question are intrinsic properties or relational properties of A so long as the change in A is change in property or properties. Even though it makes sense to say that an agent caused some event by acting in a certain way, it is sufficient for sustaining the interpretation of singular causation under consideration to indicate that it is because the agent possessed some property or some property change had occurred in it that it acted in the way it did. Then, in order to defend his claim that agent-causation is both conceptually and ontologically primitive, Lowe has to show that neither agent-causation is reducible to event-causation, nor can it be explained in terms of the fact that an agent possessed some property (or properties) or some property change has occurred in it.

Lowe does attempt to demonstrate his claim by appealing to two arguments. The first argument is an epistemological one to the effect that agent-causation has some conceptually priority. What is unique to Lowe's position on agent-causation is that he

¹ The understanding of singular causation shows that I am disposed to adopt what is called 'dispositional essentialism'. I suspect that Lowe has, though not quite explicitly, endorsed this view in explaining the notion of substance-causation. For some important accounts of dispositional essentialism, see, for example, George Bealer (1987), "The Philosophical Limits of Scientific Essentialism", *Philosophical Perspectives* 1: 289-365; Brian Ellis and C. Lierse (1994), "Dispositional Essentialism", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72: 27-45; Brian Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); G. Molnar, *Power: A Study in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); S. Mumford, *Laws in Nature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

² Cf. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, pp. 123-124.

does not hold that the notion of agent-causation is merely restricted to rational or animate agents. If agent-causation could only be exercised by rational or animate agents, the thesis that event-causation is reducible to agent-causation would entail the highly implausible doctrine that nothing is caused to occur in the world save through the agency of rational or animate beings. Lowe is quite right to realize that he could not accept such a doctrine. However, he goes on to claim that “the notion of agent causation is at least conceptually prior to that of event causation, even if it is doubted whether event causation is reducible to agent causation”.¹ Lowe’s argument for this point rests on the idea that while a passive being is incapable of distinguishing between causal sequences of events and purely coincidental sequences of events, a creature that is active and probably conscious as well can make such a distinction by actively intervening in and manipulating the course of nature.² However, I don’t believe that the argument has established the conceptual priority of agent-causation. My reason is that even though the ability to intervene in and manipulate the course of nature so as to distinguish between causal sequences of events and non-causal sequences of events can be thought to manifest some kind of agent-causation, the possibility that we can do so has implied that we have possessed the notion of event-causation in the first place. Moreover, it is not conceptually impossible that we would never make use of the ability in question even if we had it.

Lowe’s second argument is based on his analysis of causative action verbs and basic actions. Even though I don’t believe that mere language analysis can reveal something significant about metaphysics, it is worth seeing whether Lowe’s argument under consideration has succeeded. Many transitive verbs of action, as Lowe observes, have quite specific causal implications. But more than this, they also suggest that by what manner the agent caused the kind of effect which that verb implies. For example, in saying that someone killed another person, we are not merely saying that the first person caused the death of the second person, but we are also saying *how* he caused the death of the latter—that is to say, the verb ‘kill’ also implies the specific manner by which some kind of effect is caused by the agent. However, there is a special class of action which seems to defy description in these means-end terms, and this kind of action is so-called ‘basic action’. This kind of action is basic in the sense that the agent immediately performed such an action—he did not do it by any means at all. One example of this kind is a human agent’s spontaneous movement of one of his own limbs, and another example is one’s having waved his hand. It is unclear to me that in what sense such actions can be counted as actions in proper since we normally hold that in the case of human agents, action is intentional: it is always the case that an action was taken in order to fulfill some end or goal which the agent desires to achieve. In this case, description of any action always involves using means-end terms. I might spontaneously wave my hand to someone in the street, and I did this because I recognized that he was one of my friends whom I had not seen for a long time, and I waved my hand in order to draw his attention of me, or simply showed my good-will to him. It is noticeable that action can be expressive: I may take

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 134.

² Lowe makes it explicit that his argument is indebted to G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 60ff.

an action not in order to fulfill a separate end, but to express an end which is intrinsic to the action. On the other hand, if, after some reflection or introspection, I come to find out that I had no reason to wave my hand despite the fact that I did wave my hand some minutes ago, I will certainly take the spontaneous movement to be unintelligible to me.

The reason why Lowe so insists on the possibility of basic action is that he takes this kind of action to provide decisive support for the irreducibility of agent-causation. However, his argument falls short of establishing what he intends to claim. It is not difficult to see that if an action is non-basic, which means that it makes sense to describe it by the use of means-end terms, then agent-causation involving it can be analyzed according to (II) above mentioned. For example, the singular agent-causal statement that a human agent A killed someone else B by poisoning can be analyzed into the event-causal statement that A's administration of the poison to B caused B's death. However, according to Lowe, basic actions cannot be analyzed in terms of (II), which means that basic actions typically exemplify *irreducible* agent-causation. Basic actions are basic because it is said that such an action is directly caused by the agent in the sense that there is no suitable event involving the agent when such an action occurs. I don't believe that this claim can make coherent sense, which will be discussed later on when I deal with Lowe's account of free volition. Here it is interesting to note that Lowe tries to argue in support of the claim in question by saying that there must be basic actions if agents perform any action at all. It is said that "if every action had a means-end structure, this would apparently generate a vicious infinite regress, whereby the means of each action is compelled to be the end of another".¹ I am not sure that I can fully understand this view. When I intend to do something, I do it in order to achieve some specified end. I cannot see how the means of the action must become the end of another action unless my end-in-view is to be fulfilled by my performing a series of intermediate means. In this case some means may also be a middle end in the sense that I will have to adopt some means M_1 in order to achieve my end-in-view, and I will have to adopt another means M_2 to achieve M_1 , and so on. However, so long as an end can be achieved by a finite series of means, there is no possibility of vicious infinite regress. On the other hand, if I come to realize that some end I want to get cannot be achieved in this way, it is rational for me to give up the end at least in the present time. In fact, a lot of ends I take actions to achieve can be separate in the sense that means used to achieve them have no intrinsic connection of any kind, and in this case there is no infinite regress involved.

Lowe asserts that this kind of infinite regress can be avoided and thus analysis (II) can still be sustained in the case of inanimate agents. This could be true, and yet the account he offers is seriously flawed. Lowe argues that in this case, not all actions demand description in terms of causative action verbs. For example, an inanimate object can push or pull another object and in doing so it causes the latter object to move in certain ways. Suppose we go on to ask by what manner such an inanimate agent can push or pull another object. Then our answer is likely to make reference to

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 126.

behavior of the agent which is not properly described in terms of causative action verbs. We may say, for instance, that an inanimate agent can push another object by rolling into it or by falling on to it. According to Lowe, 'roll' and 'fall' are not causative action verbs, and thus we have no reason to suppose that the actions which they describe have a means-end structure. In other words, it is inappropriate to ask by what manner an inanimate object rolled into or fell on to another object. Lowe is right to see that the first object's behavior may be subject to causal explanation, for example, by referring to another object's action upon it we can explain why it rolled or fell. However, if the object had no causally relevant properties with regard to another object's action upon it, it would not have rolled or fell. A roll of cotton might not have rolled into or fell on to another object so as to push the latter to move in a certain manner, even though it had been hit on by a moving iron ball. If causal interaction between two objects depends on or consists in some causally relevant properties possessed by them, 'roll' and 'fall' are not less qualified for serving as causative action verbs than 'push' or 'pull'.

II

Thus far I have shown, or I hope so, that Lowe's argument for the primitiveness of agent-causation is unsuccessful. However, human action is quite different from and more complicated than any movement caused by any inanimate object or occurring in such an object. Lowe attempts to show that there is really irreducible agent-causation at least in the case of human basic actions. As indicated in the first section, a leading motivation for adopting agent-causation approach to free agency comes from a libertarian worry. The worry is, in Lowe's words, this:

If all human agency is ultimately just a matter of one event's causing another, then, since the causal history of the events supposedly involved in any instance of human agency will plausibly be traceable back, through prior events, to times before the agent's birth, we seem to lose all sense of the agent's being genuinely responsible for...his or her own actions.¹

However, whether moral responsibility must demand what Robert Kane calls 'ultimate responsibility'² and thus ask for endorsing a libertarian conception of free will is exactly not a simple question. Any plausible answer to the question will be, in the very least, dependent on whether the libertarian conception of free will is itself intelligible and whether compatibilists cannot give any acceptable account of free agency required by moral responsibility.³ Thus it is not sufficient to argue in support of some agent causation-based approach to free agency and moral responsibility merely asserting that neither compatibilism nor Kane's event-causal indeterminism can adequately tackle the question of moral responsibility. Put this more precisely, if ultimate responsibility must be postulated as a condition for any morally responsible action, then advocates of agent-causation approach must be able to explain *how* this

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 128.

² Cf. Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³ I have adequately dealt with these questions in my *Making Sense of Free Will*.

kind of approach meets the requirement of ultimate responsibility. There is no reason to think, as I will show, that the question can be solved merely on the basis of our *phenomenological* experience of free choice since this kind of experience can be delusive or illusive, as I will explain in due course.

Lowe makes it explicit that the only prospect of solving the problem of free will is by appealing to the notion of agent-causation. As I said, unless Lowe has been able to show in a *positive* and *coherent*¹ way that the appeal in question can explain how a human agent can take ultimate responsibility for actions or choices the agent has made, he will not have established the claim just mentioned. What is crucial to Lowe's argument is the idea that in the most fundamental sense of the term 'cause', substance causation is primitive since it is substances, not events, that possess causal powers and liabilities. I would not deny that substances can be causes if by this we mean that a substance possesses causal powers and liabilities because of some properties it does have. Here it does not matter which properties can be causally relevant so long as causal powers and liabilities are (or can be regarded as) grounded in properties. Even though some substance, for example, an atom of some kind, is regarded as indivisible, it will be manifesting its causal power because of some property (or properties) it has if it does have causal interaction with another object. Accordingly, if an event can be understood as instantiation of some property or property change in some specified spatial-temporal region, it is likewise proper to say that events can be causes.² Substances can have a special status of serving as causes merely because a substance is supposed to consist of some specific properties perhaps together with some formal structure which, though, can result from some other properties. Viewed in this way, there is no asymmetry between substances and events insofar as causal powers and liabilities are concerned. Then, what is Lowe's reason for declaring that substance causation is primary? The reason is exactly drawn from Lowe's commitment to the dependency thesis (as I call it from now on) of basic actions on agent-causation and some form of volitionism. Let me explain.

It is interesting to note that from the first-personal point of view, whenever I have performed an action, it is the 'I', the subject of action, who performs the action. If an action I have performed was not made under coercion, impulsion, or manipulation, or something like this, I can identify myself as the author of the action—I can say that the action was performed by exercising my own agency. There is no need to deny that an agent can make positive contribution to the occurrence of an action. Nor is it odd or unnatural to say that an agent caused an event to happen if the event was originated from his own agency. However the notions of belief and desire are to be understood, about which I will say more later on, it is among our ordinary understanding of action that an agent performs some action X because he desires to get Y, and he believes that he will be able to get Y by doing X. If this is

¹ I say "coherent" because I suspect that any acceptable account of ultimate responsibility the agent-causation theorist can offer can be accommodated in a reasonably acceptable compatibilist framework of free agency, or I will argue so.

² In fact, it is more proper or adequate to cite events rather than substances as causes in working out a causal explanation. It is not, of course, illegitimate to say that the bomb caused the collapse of the bridge. However, if a ten-years old schoolboy asks me why that is so, I will have to explain to him why or how a bomb can have the effect of causing a bridge to collapse by making reference to some property a bomb is thought to have.

correct, any action in proper will always involve a means-end structure. To entertain the view of action, we don't need to deny that action is done through the agent's exercise of his own agency. In other words, in this case, it is always meaningful and sometimes important (for example, for the purpose of attributing responsibility) to say that it is "I" who performed an action by exercising my own agency. It may be significant to mention one's own agency, especially when an action is made after one's rational deliberation. However, while agency can be attributed an indispensable role in the occurrence of an action, it seems to me it is wrong to claim that an action can be done with no purpose to be served by it if the action is itself intelligible to the agent. This is partly a matter of how to define human action, and yet it is an important question since it is concerned with the question of how human agency is to be best understood. It may be true that I can simply wave my hand, and yet the spontaneous movement occurred to me from which I cannot see any intention or reason to do it, despite the fact that I have done my best to try to find why I had ever waved my hand. In this circumstance, I will probably not take such a spontaneous movement to be an action, just as I do not regard the activities of my inner organs in my body as my actions, even if they happen in me.

Now, according to Lowe, a non-basic action is whatever is done by way of some means, whereas a basic action is not caused by any means whatever, which amounts to saying that it is caused directly by the agent. Thus there is irreducible agent-causation in the case of basic actions. It is not difficult to see that if non-basic actions do have a means-end structure, then any such action is always done for something else, that is, the end or goal that is to be achieved by performing such an action. In the case of non-basic actions, it is always possible to explain why or how an agent performed an action by appealing to the fact that he desires to get some specified end or goal as well as some related means-end belief. Therefore, even if any action is agent-involved in the sense that an action would not have occurred had the agent have not exercised his own agency, it seems that in the case of non-basic actions, why or how an agent performed an action can be fully explained in terms of some mental states which he possesses. Given this, it is easily seen why Lowe intends to demonstrate the existence of irreducible agent-causation by appealing to the possibility of basic actions. For to say that an action is basic is to say that it is not in virtue of some event's causing it that the agent has caused it to occur. Put this more precisely, in the case of a basic action, even though no prior event or combination of events was causally sufficient for its occurrence, it may be that the agent's agency on this occasion was causally necessary for its occurrence. If prior events alone were not causally sufficient for the occurrence of the action, and if the action would not have occurred had the agent not imposed her agency, it seems that it is in virtue of the agent's exercise of her own agency that the action came to occur. In other words, in the circumstance where the action was not causally determined by prior event, it occurred as a consequence of the agent's agency if it did occur. Accordingly, the possibility of basic actions seems to give the libertarian all of what he wants: firstly, he can claim that the agent was genuinely responsible for the occurrence of the action since it is by means of imposing her own agency that she made the action to occur;

secondly, he can claim that the agent acted freely in directly causing the action to occur since her exercise of her own agency was not causally determined by prior events.

However, the account provided by such libertarians as Lowe leaves a lot of ambiguities unclarified. Here I will only focus on two particularly relevant problems. First, is Lowe's conception of basic actions genuinely intelligible? Second, in the circumstance where prior events alone were not causally sufficient for the occurrence of an action, even though it is supposed that the agent directly caused the action to occur by exercising her own agency, how can the fact by itself explain that the agent was both free and responsible with regard to the occurrence of the action?

Let me firstly consider the first question. A basic action, recall, is that which is caused directly by the agent without having any prior event (or some combination of such events) to make that happen. The definition of basic actions seems to eliminate the possibility that a basic action is even determined by the agent through some mental state(s) he possesses in bringing about the action. However, this is not, in general, what Lowe has in mind in speaking of basic actions. If it is not the case that A's causing e (where A is an agent, and e is an action) was itself caused by some prior event or events, it may be objected that A's causing e is inexplicable, or simply a matter of pure chance. Lowe is acutely aware of the charge, and thus he indicates that A's causing e may be subject solely to rational explanation, not to causal explanation. In other words, it is a genuine possibility that A caused e *for a reason*, while denying that anything caused A's causing e. However, even if A caused e for a reason, it does not immediately follow that nothing made causal contribution to A's decision to cause e, which I take to be quite evident from our experience of rational deliberation. There are many factors, from outside and from inside, that can influence, and yet do not fully determine, my thinking about whether I am to adopt some action. In this case, if I have to act in a certain way on the specified occasion, I need to find out some reason (or some reasons) to make a decision. Wherever the reason comes from, so long as I endorse it as a decisive reason, it can be said that I act for the reason. However, without those prior factors (some of which may be events) I would perhaps have not found such a reason and acted on it: It is because those factors did not fully determine how I am to act that I was determined to seek some reason as the final determining ground of my action. In the sense they made causal contribution to my deliberation about how to act. It is true that in many circumstances, causal stimuli from the world don't immediately determine our actions. In fact, if whatever we had done were determined by external causal factors, we would surely have no freedom. Instead, as rational agents, we can decide how to act, or whether or not to act, on the basis of our deliberation about relevant reasons and commitments. It is the awareness of our rational agency that makes us to realize that we can be, at least sometimes, the author of our actions, and thus can take responsibility for our actions.

Even though Lowe does not, as it seems, deny that prior events can have causal influence on A's causing e, he still insists that agent-causation cannot be reduced to event-causation at least in the case of basic actions.¹ This may be understood as

¹ "[An] advocate of irreducible agent causation need not say that no events whatever are (contributory) causes of

saying that if prior events can have causal influence on, though did not fully determine, A's causing e, then it must be the case that it was in virtue of A's imposing his own agency that A caused e. Furthermore, if A was freely exercising his own agency in causing e in this case, then appeal to irreducible agent-causation seems to tackle a dilemma with which we are faced in the problem of free will. The dilemma is this: given that an event must either have or lack a cause, on the one hand, if our choices are caused, then we lack genuine freedom; on the other hand, if our choices are uncaused and thus merely a matter of pure chance, then we lack genuine freedom. The dilemma does not come out without any presuppositions. For example, it obviously assumes that compatibilism is false and that we do have free will. However, even if the libertarian has succeeded in demonstrating the falsity of compatibilism, which I don't believe to be true,¹ he must be able to put forward some *positive* argument for the claim that we do have free will. It is not enough merely to indicate that the falsity of compatibilism entails the existence of a libertarian free will. Without such an argument it would entirely be *ad hoc* to assert that appeal to irreducible agent-causation solves the problem of free will. For, in any agent-causation approach to free agency, what is at issue is exactly how an agent can freely exercise his agency to cause an action directly. I am not denying, as I have made explicit in the above, that any human action (free action included) is brought about through one's exercise of one's own agency. What I am interested in inquiring is the question of how the agent-causation theorist can explain free agency merely on the basis of the notion of irreducible agent-causation.

Suppose that my raising my arm is a basic action in the sense that there is nothing I do by which I cause my arm to rise. Then we may ask: how can it be that I cause my arm to rise without doing something else? An answer offered by Lowe is that I directly raise my arm by *willing* to raising my arm. To understand and evaluate this view, we need to introduce a distinction Lowe makes. Agent-causation theorists are disposed to think that a person's actions (almost exclusively) consist in that person's causing certain events. This view is indeed acceptable if human actions essentially involve one's active exercise of one's own agency. Lowe calls 'action-results' the events which occur as a result of one's actions. For example, raising one's arm is an action in that it is a matter of one's causing one's arm to rise, and arm-rising is an action-result which may also be regarded as an event. According to the distinction, volitions, or acts of will, are not actions in that willing does not consist in causing something to happen, even if volitions can be seen as causes, in the event-causation sense, of all the action-results of our voluntary actions.

This claim strikes me as somewhat puzzling, and yet let me try to make sense of it. It may be true that if I will to raise my arm, then my arm rises—I need not do anything else to make my arm to rise. Since volitions simply consist in one's exercising one's power of will and by so doing causing certain events, volitions can be understood as causes of action-results, but not causes of actions, and thus are

the event that is caused by an agent in a case of 'basic' action: all that is being claimed is that it is not in virtue of its causation by any events whatever that the agent may be said to cause that event" (Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 132).

¹ This is part of what I have done in my *Making Sense of Free Will*, especially chapters 3, 5 and 7.

constitutive of actions. This is, however, at best true in the case of basic actions since volitions can actually be causes of actions in the case of non-basic actions. If I will to murder you by poisoning you in order to get your money, then my willing to do so caused your death by taking the act of poisoning you. Here poisoning you was the proximal cause of your death, and yet it is also true that my willing to murder you caused my taking the act of poisoning you. Lowe holds that the will is a power or natural capability of agents in the sense that it can be exercised or manifested from time to time. However, he denies that the will is a causal power on the ground that its exercise does not consist in the causing of some relevant kind of effect, even though its exercise does normally have an action-result appropriate to the kind of action which the agent wills to perform. It is evident, at least from the example just mentioned, that in the case of non-basic actions, what Lowe calls ‘an action-result’ is exactly an action that is taken by the agent as means to some goal or end he entertains. To say that an action has a means-end structure is to say that the agent takes some specified means, which can be by itself an action, to fulfill some end he wants to get. If it is the case that I will something by doing something else, then how is it not the case that my willing something caused my doing something else? If my willing something was not a cause at all, how had my doing something else occurred?¹ On the other hand, if the will is merely an executive power, rather than a causal power, as Lowe takes it, then it is proper to say that when I will something, I do something else by imposing my will so that I can get what I will. However, imposing one’s will so as to get what one wills has been taking an action. Lowe, of course, will not object to this point since volitions, on his view, are constitutive of actions in the sense that actions always involves one’s active exercise of one’s own agency. Now the question is this: in the case of so-called ‘basic actions’, how can a volition constitute a basic action without being the case that it also plays a causal role in the occurrence of the action?

Lowe resist regarding the will as a species of causal power because he holds that what is distinctive of causal powers and liabilities is that they are powers to affect or be affected by objects in certain ways. If the will had been taken as a causal power, it would be hopeless, given Lowe’s commitment to libertarianism, to claim that an agent can *freely* will to do something. Basic actions, according to Lowe, exemplify the real possibility of free volitions. Surely I can exercise my will by willing to raise my arm even though my arm does not actually rise as a result of my so willing. This implies, according to Lowe, that “an exercise of my will consists, in itself, merely in my willing to do something, not in my actually doing that thing as a consequence of my so willing”.² If freedom of the will is to be understood in this way, then my will is always free so long as I am not caused to exercise my will by any factor which I take to be external or foreign to me. This amounts to saying that whenever I feel being free in exercising my will, my will is free. Thus Lowe defines the will as a spontaneous power. However, the conception of a free will offered by Lowe falls into two serious troubles. On the one hand, it is not quite different from some compatibilist account of

¹ The question makes sense at least to the extent that some counterfactual analysis of singular causation is correct.

² Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 150.

free will, for example, the one advocated and developed by Harry Frankfurt.¹ Let alone, Lowe's account of free will merely on the basis of our phenomenological experience of free volition is far from satisfied as compared with Frankfurt's one. On the other hand, it looks like as a completely *ad hoc* move to argue that our will can be free by defining the will as a spontaneous power.

Of course, Lowe may have some substantive account of why or how the will can be spontaneous and thus free in the sense. As far as I can see, Lowe's account depends on the attempt to combine an agent-causation approach to action with volitionism. Lowe initially observes that some inanimate objects can also have a spontaneous power. For example, radium has a spontaneous power to undergo radioactive decay in the sense that there is no prior event to cause its radioactive decay. It does not matter whether the claim is really true as Lowe thinks. What is important here is that Lowe does not actually think about the spontaneous power which a human will may have in this way. He is acutely aware of a difficulty, faced by such classical agent-causation theorists as R. M. Chisholm and Richard Taylor, to the effect that if it was not in virtue of something that the agent caused some event to happen, there would be no such thing as agent-causation *per se*.² To avoid the difficulty, Lowe supposes that it is always by willing that we cause action-results to happen when we act freely, and that our volitions are causes of those events in the event-causation sense of 'cause'. In this way Lowe can explain why different action-results come out when an agent has different volitions on different occasions. Then his view seems to take the form: willing can be both a constituent of a basic action and a cause of what happens as a result of that action. In other words, willing to do A seems to mean that deciding to do A by exercising one's will and A occurs as a result of putting the decision into action. This seems nicely to capture Lowe's central claim that agents as substances always cause their effect by acting in some manner.

However, to demonstrate that an agent is free at least in deciding to do something by exercising his will, Lowe must show that at least in some cases, an agent's acting in some specific manner is not caused. Natural causal powers and liabilities are such that the objects possessing them have no choice as to whether or not to exercise or manifest them. It follows that if the will is free, it cannot be a species of causal power since being free at least means being free to choose among available courses of action. As far as I can see, the only argument Lowe could have offered for the freedom of will is that we are at least sometimes consciously aware that we are freely exercising our will. However, the phenomenological experience of 'free' volitions can be illusive.³ That I feel my being free or even free to will to do something may not imply that I am genuinely free, especially because, according to Lowe, I can exercise my will by willing to do A, even if A does not actually occur as a result of my so willing. Moreover, even though I am really free in the specified sense, the understanding of freedom or free will is quite trivial since it means that being free simply consists in

¹ Cf. Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² The difficulty was initially indicated by C. D. Broad in Broad (1952), "Determinism, Indeterminism, and Libertarianism", in C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1952). For some relevant discussion, see Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, pp. 74-76.

³ I will go further to explain this point in due course.

being free to will at one's will, without even specifying what it is to will something.

Lowe is indeed right to see that being spontaneous is merely a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the freedom of will. Some inanimate objects can be spontaneous without being free since they have no choice as to whether or not to exercise or manifest their causal powers. For Lowe, this is an important reason why the will cannot be a species of causal power even if it is spontaneous. Since the will is a kind of power, it follows that if it is really free, or can be free at least sometimes, it must have choice as to whether or not to exercise the power it is supposed to possess. Lowe obviously takes choice to be an exercise of the power of will, as he says that "willing precisely is choosing a course of action, normally in preference to some other course of action".¹ If choice is to be seen as an exercise of the power of will, then it seems that we should say that it is by exercising the power of will that the agent chooses a course of action in preference to another one. In other words, it cannot be the case that choice is made by the will itself. It is more proper to say that choice is made by the agent himself *in terms of something*, even though he does this through exercising the power of his will. The will, though construed as a power, cannot by itself make a choice without having something that serves as the decisive ground on which the agent makes a choice. For Lowe, the will cannot be conceived as a power whose exercise is characteristically determined by the causal influence of other objects. On the other hand, Lowe is also unwilling to regard the will as a power whose manifestations are merely the outcome of chance. He thereby concludes that the will can only be conceived as a power that is characteristically exercised in the light of reason—that is to say, the will is a *rational* power.

I have initially shown that it is incorrect to conceive of the will as being a power that can choose by itself, namely, without depending upon something else. One can, of course, decide to make a choice by exercising one's will on the basis of one's deliberation about relevant reasons. In this case the will is nothing more than the power to execute the conclusion of one's rational deliberation. Lowe does not intend to deny this point since he actually takes volition to be the executive element in intentional action.² If the will consists in the power to execute a choice or decision after the agent has made such a choice or decision on the basis of his rational deliberation, it is also proper to characterize the will as an "active power". For acting on the conclusion of one's rational deliberation is indeed different from being caused to act by some objects external to oneself or their causal influence, in which case action can be said to be passive. When an agent acts in response to the demands of reason, he can be said to be active since his action reflects his recognition of, and commitments to, some relevant reasons, by which he can be said to make some active contribution to the occurrence of the action. However, it is also evident from this that it is not the will as such, but the agent, that is responding to the demands of reason, and deliberating on the basis of the reasons which he has recognized and taken as relevant. One can indeed exercise one's will in deciding how to act or whether or not to act on the basis of one's deliberation. But it is a sheer mistake to claim that the will

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 155.

² Cf. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, pp. 171-176.

“is [by itself] a rational power, that is, a power whose exercises are not only spontaneous but also responsive to the demands of reason”.¹ Even though Kant does sometimes identify the will with *pure* practical reason and thus takes the will to be spontaneous in the sense that it can act merely on the demands of pure reason, he is also quite clear that in the case of human agents, the will does not always follow the demands of pure reason. This is why Kant comes to distinguish between the will as a power of legislation and the will merely as a power of choice and execution. If the will had been characterized as a rational power, as in Lowe, there would not be the possibility of irrational actions since it is likewise possible that such an action was done by an agent through exercising his will.²

Then, how does Lowe so insist that the will must be a spontaneous and rational power? Lowe believes, as indicated in the above, that he can succeed in solving the problem of free will by combining an agent-causation approach with volitionism. However, this cannot be true. To say that some event may be uncaused, according to Lowe, is just to say that a substance may sometimes act in a certain manner even though it is not the case that any substance (itself included) causes it to act in that manner. The claim suggests that it is itself an event that a substance acts in a certain manner. If the event in question is not caused, it follows that it is spontaneous that a substance acts in a certain manner. However, how can it be that a substance acts in a certain manner without being the case that there is something to bring it about? It is not implausible to say that acting in a certain manner is itself an event. It does not suffice to attempt to explain how such an event happened by saying that it is the agent who made that event to happen by directly exercising his will. Why not? In the first place, it would be explanatorily trivial to explain the occurrence of such an event in this way if any event of this kind occurred as a result of the agent’s directly exercising his will. In the second place, if this was how Lowe explains the occurrence of an uncaused event, he would fall into the difficulty encountered by classical agent-causation theory, namely, that this type of agent-causation theory cannot explain why the agent acted in this manner rather than that manner, or why the agent made this event rather than that event to happen.³ To make his view reasonable, Lowe will have to say, as we have seen, that it is in the light of some reasons which the agent may have in deliberating about how to act that he acts in this manner rather than that manner. Thus we can conclude that for a rational agent, a choice is always made on the basis of some reasons. If having a will means being able to choose to act in a certain way, and if choice must be understood as being the exercise of a rational power,⁴ it follows, according to Lowe, that the will must be a rational power.

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 176.

² This is also relevant to Lowe’s understanding of ‘acting for a reason’, which will be briefly discussed in what follows.

³ This is how the problem of luck arises in the case of the classical agent-causal theorist. Randolph Clarke has tried to evade the problem by integrating an agent-causal view with a non-deterministic event-causal view. But the attempt did not succeed. For my criticisms of O’Connor and Clarke with regard to the problem of luck, see my *Making Sense of Free Will*, pp. 563-604. As for Clarke’s own view, see Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Account of Free Will*, especially chapters 8 and 9, and Clarke (2005), “Agent Causation and the Problem of Luck”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86: 408-421. Two particularly relevant discussions of this issue are: I. Haji (2003), “Active Control, Agent-Causation and Free Action”, *Philosophical Explorations* 7: 131-148; Alfred R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 3.

⁴ Whether choice can be understood is obviously questionable since choice can be irrational.

The claim that the will is a rational power is, however, ambiguous. If the will is the power to *execute* the decision which the agent makes on the basis of some reasons, then the will can be said to be rational when it does execute the decision in question. It can be said to be rational because it executes what the agent takes to be most reasonable to do on some given occasion. Precisely speaking, however, in this case, it is not the will as such that is rational—instead it is the agent that is rational in choosing to so act. If the agent had been subject to the weakness of will, for example, he would not have chosen to so act. In fact, if the will was always a rational power, the possibility of *akrasia* would never occur.¹ Then in what sense does Lowe assert that the will is a rational power? Lowe has initially characterized the will as being spontaneous so as to allow the possibility that an agent's acting in a certain manner can be uncaused in the sense specified in the above. However, to escape from the difficulty just mentioned in the last paragraph, he has to say that the will is characteristically exercised in the light of reason. But saying this is quite different from saying that the will is itself a rational power. It is more proper to say that the will can, but does not necessarily, follow the demands of reason.

However, if the will is simply the power that can be exercised so as to execute a decision or choice which one makes on the basis of one's rational deliberation, Lowe would not get what he wants to get. In other words, he cannot consistently advance an account of libertarian free agency by combining an agent-causation approach to action with volitionism. For a volitionist, it is always by willing that we cause what Lowe calls 'action-results', for example, arm-rising, when we act freely. Lowe is happy to acknowledge that our willings are causes of those events exactly in the event-causation sense of 'cause'. This may be understood as meaning that it is in virtue of my willing to raise my arm that I act in a certain way, as a result of which my arm rises. Even though my willing to raise my arm is supposedly constitutive of my acting in a certain way, my-acting-in-a-certain-way is exactly an event. How could such an event have occurred if, according to the libertarian, it must be uncaused in the case of a free action? The only answer the libertarian can offer is that it is in virtue of my willing to raise my arm that I raise my arm. Moreover, my willing to raise my arm must be uncaused if I am to be free to raise my arm. However, for Lowe, saying that my willing to do something is uncaused cannot be saying that there is nothing in virtue of which I will to do something since he is aware of the difficulty encountered by classical agent-causation theory. To avoid the difficulty, he naturally assumes that one can will to do something for a reason, or simply that one can act for a reason. This move may suggest that acting for a reason can be uncaused and thus free in the libertarian sense of free action, as Lowe makes it explicit:

To act for a reason is to act in a way that is responsive to the cogency of certain considerations in favor of one's so doing—and this is incompatible with one's being caused to act in that way, because causal processes bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their

¹ No matter whether *akrasia* is rational or not, it seems to me that the characterization of the will as a rational power *a priori* rules out the possibility of *akrasia*, although I will not argue about this point in the paper.

favor.¹

III

Lowe's argument for the claim that acting for a reason must be free in the libertarian sense seems to rest on the idea that no substance can be free in acting in a certain way if it was *caused* to act in that way, whether by another substance or even by itself acting upon itself. I do believe that being free has something to do with the ability to act for reasons. But it seems to me that Lowe is mistaken in attempting to argue for this claim by appealing to the notion of an irreducible agent-causation. Let me explain.

In characterizing the will as being a spontaneous power, Lowe intends to insist that the activity of the will can be uncaused at least in some circumstances. The only argument offered by Lowe for this is that one can act for a reason. Lowe goes on to argue that acting for a reason is not caused to act on the ground that "to act in the light of one's reasons for acting in this or that way, one must...be able to *choose* so to act" at least in the minimal sense that "one must be able to *refrain* from choosing to act in a certain way".² However, even if it is granted that acting for a reason is not caused to act, it is possible that when one decided to act in a certain way for a reason, the same reason is also the reason for which one refrained from choosing to act in some alternative way. If I have taken it to be a decisive reason for me to meet a student this afternoon that I have promised to discuss his MA thesis with him this afternoon, then this reason is also the reason for which I refrain from choosing to go to museum this afternoon. So long as I identify myself with such a reason on the specified occasion, I can say that I am free in acting for the reason, even though this means that I will be unable to go to museum, and thus miss the last chance to appreciate the impressionist exhibition. This kind of freedom does not rest on the possibility that there is at least an alternative course of action open to me. Thus, if being free solely consists in acting for a certain reason, compatibilists can accept the view of freedom, or even welcome it. A compatibilist may go further to say that it does not matter whether my acting in a certain way is caused by the mental states involved in my awareness of such a reason so long as I have reflectively identified the reason with myself on the specified occasion, which may be understood, in a Frankfurtian sense, as meaning that I have wholeheartedly endorsed the reason after any rational reflection I can make. To distinguish himself from such a compatibilist, Lowe must answer the following question: what is so special about acting in the light of a certain reason that it cannot be explained in terms of the mental states involved in one's awareness of the reason?

To see what answer Lowe can offer to the question, we must turn to examine his views on personal agency. Lowe conceives of personal agency as being a special case of substance causation with two essential features. First, persons are substances of a distinctive kind, with distinctive existence and identity conditions and a characteristic range of causal powers and liabilities. Second, and more importantly, persons are also

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 156.

² Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 156.

agents with rational powers. Lowe believes that agent-causation is not only irreducible but also primary in the sense that causation is fundamentally a matter of substances exercising their causal powers to act upon other substances possessing causal liabilities. I have no objection to Lowe's view that persons are psychological substances that bear properties, stand in relations to other substances, persist through change, and possess distinctive psychological powers such as perception, thought, reason and will. Here I also will not argue against the controversial view that the biological processes embodied in human persons cannot simply be, or in any way constitute, those psychological processes of thought and reasoning, though I believe that Lowe's argument for it is far from convincing. What I want to show is that even if we concede his views on personal agency, Lowe has not succeeded in demonstrating that it is because we possess such personal agency that we are free in the libertarian sense of freedom.

Lowe is insistent on the libertarian 'intuition' that unless there is some room between pure chance and causal necessity we will be unlikely to claim that we are the authors of our actions. To be the authors of our actions, we must so act that our actions are neither mere chance occurrences nor events that are entirely causally determined by prior events. In Lowe's view, if we must accept the dictum that reasons are causes, abandoning the idea that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between causal and rational explanation, then there is no way in which we can be free in the libertarian sense. Thus we must conceive of the agent as having an irreducible and ineliminable role to play in the generation of free actions. Here the idea is that even if no prior events are causally sufficient for the occurrence of an action, the action can be free and yet not a mere chance occurrence since it can result from the agent's exercise of his rational powers. Nobody wants to deny that actions are normally generated through one's agency. Even if I was caused to escape from a tiger I encountered in a wild forest, I did this partly through instinctive reactions and partly through exercising my agency. It may be said that I was passively exercising my agency in this case, and thus not free in taking action to escape from this tiger in the sense, which Lowe once mentions, that my action was merely in accordance with certain of my reasons for acting, but was not done for a reason.¹ If a free action must somehow consist in my *active* exercise of my agency, it seems to follow that whenever I act for a reason, I am freely acting. This is exactly what Lowe has in mind in talking about free actions since he explicitly conceives of the will as being a power that is characteristically exercised in the light of reason, and then identifies the ability to act for a reason with the power to choose to act in a certain way.

However, if Lowe is to argue for the possibility of libertarian free actions merely by saying that acting for a reason must be free in the libertarian sense, then his conclusion will be unwarranted. Suppose I am aware that there is a reason for my acting in a certain way, for example, taking a taxi to go to school before three o'clock this afternoon. I have the reason because I have promised a student that I shall meet him on the appointed time to discuss his thesis. Then I will act in a certain way, and in

¹ Cf. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 156. However, it seems doubtful that the distinction between acting in accordance with a reason and acting for a reason can be sharply drawn. In the example, it is entirely intelligible to say that I was rational in taking action to escape from the tiger.

so acting I am actively exercising my agency in the sense that no prior events cause me to so act and I so act for a reason which is that I have promised to meet the student. In this case, however, it is still unclear in what sense I have a libertarian free will in so acting. It is true, in this case, that I was not forced to act in a certain way. Instead I acted in order to keep my promise which I take to be a good reason for acting in a certain way. The compatibilist will say that I was free in acting for such a reason to the extent that the reason was not what I was forced to accept and there was nothing hindering me from acting in this way. If acting for a reason can be free in the compatibilist sense, at least in some circumstances, why does Lowe take pains to demonstrate this point by appealing to the notion of agent-causation together with volitionism? As far as I can see, the only reason Lowe can have for taking this move comes from the claim that the way in which one exercises one's own agency should not be determined by external objects and circumstances because the active exercise of one's own agency is just what the libertarian freedom lies in. Given this, it becomes evident why Lowe so closely associates the idea of acting for a reason with the active exercise in question.

It is central to libertarianism that exercises of the will must not be caused by prior events if the will is to be free. Lowe obviously thinks that it is sufficient for the will to have libertarian freedom that it is exercised in the light of certain reasons. However the notion of a reason for acting is to be construed, about which I will say something later on, it is true that in most cases of human actions, we act for a certain reason. Then, what is so special about acting for a reason that makes so acting to be free in the libertarian sense? To act for a reason is, of course, to act in a certain way. But this does nothing to explain the alleged connection between so acting and having libertarian freedom. If I have different motives for acting, I will act differently. Nevertheless, Lowe may think that the connection can be established by saying that "to act in the light of one's reasons for acting in this or that way, one must... be able to choose so to act".¹ It is not particularly clear how the claim is drawn. How can the ability to acting for a reason entail or imply the power to choose? If I have some different reasons in deliberating about how to act or whether or not to act in a certain way, I might make a choice on the basis of my deliberation. If these reasons are in some tension or competition, I would have to make appeal to some other (or higher-order) reasons to make a choice had I have to make a choice. It is clear from this case that if choice should not be random or arbitrary, a choice was always made on the basis of one's deliberation about relevant reasons had it have been made. In thinking about whether or not to act or how to act in the light of reasons, one must assume that one can choose according to the results of one's deliberation, otherwise one would have no need to deliberate in the light of reasons. However, it is not enough to argue that we have libertarian free will simply by saying that being able act for a reason presupposes being able to choose to act in a certain way. This is so because the view that practical deliberation always presupposes open alternatives is neutral with regard to the debate between compatibilism and libertarianism.² Thus,

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 156.

² About this point, see Tomis Kapitan (1986), "Deliberation and the Presumption of Open Alternatives",

without further argument, Lowe cannot conclude that one does have the libertarian power of choice from the mere claim that “one cannot rationally believe that one is not in possession of such a power”.¹

In the case of Lowe’s basic actions, to act for a reason is to act in such a way that an action-result is caused directly by the agent’s acting in a certain manner which is itself uncaused, however. Since acting in a certain manner is *par excellence* an event, it is natural to ask the question of how it can be that it is uncaused. In response, Lowe may say that for an agent, having a reason for acting is constitutive of acting in a certain way.² It may be that whenever I have a reason to act, I act in a certain way. Then acting for a reason explains, at least to a large extent, how I exercise my agency to bring about an action-result. If the interpretation is plausible, it seems to amount to saying that no matter whether an action-result has sufficient event-causes or not, it is *because* I have a reason for acting that I act in a certain way so as to bring about the action-result, where ‘because’ is to be understood in the sense of a cause. Lowe so insists on acting for a reason because he intends to claim that acting for a reason is not caused to act in a certain way. In some sense, acting for a reason is exactly not caused to act by external objects and circumstances, at least not so directly. But this is still insufficient for showing that so acting is not caused by, for example, the agent’s state of entertaining the reason for which he acts, together with his exercise of his agency.³ Lowe may respond that it is not sufficient to explain how an agent acts in a certain way to bring about an action-result merely by making reference to the agent’s state of entertaining the reason for which he acts. This is so because it is possible that the agent might not have acted for the reason, or he might have chosen to act otherwise even though he had taken the reason to be decisive on the given occasion. In the first case, if the agent did not act for the reason, it may be because he did not regard the reason as decisive on the given occasion, or because he was still uncertain whether he should act for the reason. In the second case, had he chosen to act otherwise, contrary to what he took to be most reasonable to do, he would be acting irrationally. I have no intention to deny the possibility of irrational actions. What I want to emphasize is that if, in order to insist on his libertarian position, a libertarian would have to claim that one could still choose to so act as to violate one’s all-things-considered judgment,⁴ libertarianism should be rejected. So acting is worse than being caused to act in the way which is nevertheless in accordance with some reason for which one acts sometimes. On the other hand, if Lowe asserts that one can still make a choice which is free and yet not random merely by exercising one’s will even when one is faced with two competing reasons which happen to have the same weight, he has left libertarian freedom in mystery. The possibility of libertarian freedom cannot be explained merely by claiming that one can make a free choice by exercising one’s will

Philosophical Quarterly 36: 230-251.

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 157.

² Here, to avoid unnecessary complications, I will assume that the reason for which the agent acts in a certain way is his decisive reason for so acting.

³ This may be dropped down since any significant action is done by exercising one’s own agency.

⁴ This is exactly what Lowe has done in discussing a thought experiment suggested by Peter van Inwagen. In trying to refute the conclusion van Inwagen draws from the experiment, Lowe declares that “a libertarian should happily accept that our freedom to choose is a freedom even to choose irrationally” (Lowe, p. 193). Cf. Peter van Inwagen (2002), “Free Will Remains a Mystery”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 14: 1-19.

even when one has no reason to exercise one's will in a certain way.

It is not intuitively implausible to understand the will as the disposition to execute a decision for action according to something. So construed, the will does not have the power Lowe ascribes to it to execute a decision *spontaneously*.¹ Even if the will cannot be identified with desire or want as such at least to the extent that it can take the latter to be its objects, it must be for its exercise dependent on something (some consideration or reason, for example). Thus it cannot be right, or it does not make sense, to talk about freedom of the will *per se*. If we have to continue to use the conventional term 'free will', it is more adequate to take it to mean 'freedom to form one's volition'. How to understand the expression is obviously dependent on how to understand the notion of freedom in the first place. If one does not believe in the possibility of libertarian freedom, one may be disposed to relate the notion of freedom to that of autonomy, and then approach the problem of autonomy along the line suggested by some compatibilism-oriented theorists.² It is unnecessary to deal with this issue here, and it is enough to point out that the phenomenology of willing, intending and acting intentionally makes it clear that in discussing 'freedom to form one's volition', we must take into account the processes by which any given choice, decision, or volition is formed. It turns out that libertarian agent-causal theorists are not more successful than their opponents in this regard.³ In fact, in asserting that an agent still could make a free and yet non-chancy choice by 'actively' exercising his agency even in the circumstance where he had no further reason to break the balanced state of two competing reasons for acting, the libertarian has *presupposed* the possibility of libertarian freedom. Moreover, even if one can occasionally have such experience, this is not sufficient for establishing the existence of libertarian freedom. This can be explicated as follows. If there is a gap between reasons for making a decision and making the decision, or between the decision and starting to act so that we don't feel that the prior causes of the next conscious state sets causally sufficient conditions for it, then our experience of the gap disposes us to believe that we are free.⁴ If our belief in freedom or free will is indeed drawn from such experience, then we can believe that we have freedom or free will even in a deterministic world since such a world does not rule out such experience. In fact, in such a world, we do have such experience in virtue of ignorance or epistemic uncertainty. Thus there is no reason to think that such experience just suggests libertarian freedom.

I suspect that Lowe's preoccupation with libertarian freedom has brought his whole argument into a circle. If one has rejected compatibilism as unsatisfied while insisting on the possibility of libertarian freedom, one is disposed to maintain that

¹ Even if Thomas Reid is often seen as a libertarian, which is in my view wrong, Reid did not understand the will in this way. Cf. my "Thomas Reid on Active Power and Free Agency", unpublished manuscript.

² For example, Michael E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Bratman, *Structure of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Harry Frankfurt (1988) and (1999); Alfred R. Mele, *Autonomous Agents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and Mele, *Motivation and Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ For example, see Alfred R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, pp. 53-75, for his insightful criticisms of T. O'Connor and R. Clarke.

⁴ Cf. John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 62. See also John Searle, *Freedom and Neurobiology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 42. It is worth indicating that even if Searle rightly identifies the phenomenology of feeling freedom, he gives a mistaken and misleading account of it. See my *Making Sense of Free Will*, pp. 611-615.

there must be some room between causal necessity and mere chance so that the problem of free can be solved in an intelligible way. This is in fact what motivates the agent-causation approach to the problem since agent-causal theorists generally believe that the specified requirement can be satisfied by appealing to the notion of agent-causation. For example, in Timothy O'Connor's theory, reasons are said to have a tendency-conferring character: so long as an agent is already aware of a certain reason for action or choice, he is disposed to take the action or make the choice, and yet does not necessarily to do so. By appealing to the structured influence of reasons, O'Connor intends to explain why the agent can have some degree of control over what he does. On the other hand, given that the influence does not necessarily determine the agent's action, it is still completely up to him which action or choice he will make, and thus he is still free in the sense.¹ Appeal to the notion of agent-causation seems to give the libertarian all of what he wants to get. However, if the structured influence of reasons does not necessarily dispose the agent to make a choice, it is at least unclear that the choice which the agent actually made is not a chancy one. Lowe seems explicitly to be aware of the difficulty. Thus he attempts to explain how the agent has control over the way in which he exercises his power of free choice in terms of the idea of acting for reasons. Lowe believes that we would not have genuine control over our actions if our actions were causally determined for us by prior events. It follows, according to Lowe, that "it is because we have a power of choice which we can exercise freely—that is, a power of choice whose exercises are not causally determined by prior events—that we have control over our actions."² It may be true that if we were not causally determined to exercise the power in question, we had control over what we did in exercising the power. Would this show that we were also free in exercising the power? For Lowe, the answer is certainly positive. However, he can give a positive answer simply because he has straightforwardly *defined* uncaused actions (in the sense of event-causation) as being free.³

Now the question is this: can Lowe go further to explain why uncaused actions in the sense of event-causation must be free? Lowe incessantly insists that no action that is causally determined for us by prior events can be free. Being so caused to act is not acting freely probably because so acting does not reflect our rational agency at all. This is indeed a reasonable claim at least from a Kantian point of view. Thus I will not debate whether the distinction Lowe draws between 'the world of causes' and 'the world of reasons', which is central to his solution to the problem of free will, is sound, despite the fact that it seems to be making a wholly *ad hoc* move to solve the problem by introducing the distinction. Here it is enough to point out that even if free agency just consists in the agent's exercising his power of choice in the light of reasons so as to bring about an event, the processes by which he forms a reason may be causally determined. I might not have chosen to buy some brand of coffee bean in a supermarket if I had not perceived it. It is true that the perception alone was not sufficient for my decision to buy this kind of coffee bean since it is my preference for

¹ See Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, pp. 95-101.

² Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 195.

³ Here it is worth indicating that any specific exercise of the power on a given occasion is itself an action, though an agent-caused action.

this kind of coffee bean that played a leading motivating role in the decision. But it is also true that without the perceptual input I would not have made the decision, and thus it made a causal contribution to the decision. Then was I free in making the decision? Lowe might respond that I could be free in this regard on the ground that even if I had been disposed to buy that kind of coffee bean, I could have acted otherwise, or more generally speaking, that however reasons for which I am to act are formed, I can freely choose to act in the light of some reason. How can I freely choose to act in the light of some reason among alternative reasons if not on the basis of my further consideration of that reason or some relevant reasons? This question is central to Lowe's argument under discussion since he insists, probably in order to avoid the charge of luck, that "choice, by its very nature, is never exercised 'blindly', but is always informed by or responsive to reasons for action".¹ If any choice is always made in this way, why not straightforwardly say that choice is determined by the agent's final reason that is to be construed as the one at which the agent has arrived after his rational deliberation?

It turns out that the question turns is crucial to clarifying the very nature of Lowe's project of solving the freewill problem. As indicated in the above, for a compatibilist, a choice can be free to the extent that the agent has reflectively endorsed the reasons on which the choice is made. It does not matter, for such a compatibilist, whether or not we should regard the choice as determined by those reasons together with the agent's rational deliberation about them, which is by and large a matter of convention. To distinguish himself from such a compatibilist, Lowe will have to say that even though one had made such a choice, one still could have chosen otherwise. But how one could have chosen otherwise in this case is just what the libertarian need to explain—he cannot only assert this, nor is it sufficient to merely claim that the phenomenology of our choice tells us that we have libertarian freedom of choice. To explain how we can control the way in which we exercise our power of choice, Lowe must assume that any choice is always made by what I just call 'a final reason'.²

If any choice is always made in this way, what role is agent-causation supposed to play in the process of exercising the alleged power of choice? It is not sufficient to answer the question by saying that it is the agent who makes a choice by exercising his own agency. For being caused to act in a certain way also involves exercising one's own agency, though perhaps not in an active manner. Nor can Lowe can answer the question in the way O'Connor conceives, namely, by arguing that even when no reason determines an agent to act, the agent can still choose to act in a certain way by exercising his active power. For if Lowe is to argue in this way, not only does his insistence on acting for reason become explanatorily unnecessary, but he also will

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 194.

² As he makes it explicit: "It does not make sense...to think of an agent as *choosing* between two or more possible courses of action without being aware of any consideration whatever in favor of carrying out any of them" (p. 194). If I am faced a choice between two courses of action for which equally good reasons seems to present themselves, and yet I have to make a choice, I may do this either arbitrarily or on the basis of some felt disposition. In the former case, I will not think that my choice was made on any reason—I simply had to make it with some feeling of regret. In the later case, it may be that I could not explicitly find what the felt disposition came from in making a choice.

leave unexplained how the exercise of one's agency is free, as explicated in the above. In thinking about how to choose, if I come to find that I have a final reason for making a choice, then I will make the choice to the extent that I am rational. The only role that can be ascribed to agent-causation is that of exercising one's own agency so as to carry out the decision to make a choice according to one's commitment to the final reason or one's recognition of its reason-giving force. Moreover, if choice is always made in the light of a final reason, which is in a fact an all-things-considered reason in a given circumstance, it must be the case that it is because a choice is by its very nature such that the agent decides to carry out the choice. Then to act for a final reason is to decide to act in a certain way in virtue of the agent's recognition of the reason's reason-giving force. This helps explain Lowe's intuition that from the first-personal point of view, the "I" as the subject of action is indeed ineliminable. But this is not because, as Lowe thinks, the agent will 'disappear' once we deny that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between causal and rational explanation. Instead this is because it is the agent who recognizes the reason-giving force of a reason, and who acts in the light of such a reason.

We are now in a position to see why Lowe's argument for the distinction in question is not well-founded. Lowe resists seeing reasons for acting as consisting of the one's beliefs and desires on the ground that acting out of one's beliefs and desires is caused to act. He holds this view because he thinks that whatever beliefs and desires we have, we are caused to have them. But this is surely incorrect. Many desires we have are not unmotivated desires, to use a term from Thomas Nagel.¹ Instead they are formed on the basis of some reasons or considerations. In spite of the fact, desires cannot be identified with those reasons or considerations since desire is said to have the direction of fit from the mind to the world. On the other hand, it is true that I will probably have to hold a belief once I have been presented with sufficient evidence for the belief. But to say this is not to say that a belief is always formed passively. One can surely take efforts to seek relevant evidence for or against a belief, or make sure whether or not what one believes is true or most likely to be true. Lowe is right to see that it is not one's belief and desire as such, but the content of one's belief and desire, that can constitute one's reason for acting in a certain way. But I take it to be evident that it is insufficient for explaining how an action comes to happen merely to mention the content of one's belief and desire without making reference to one's mental states of believing and desiring. However Lowe understands a reason for acting,² it is at least the case that only if one comes to believe that some reason is really the reason for which one is to act in a certain way, can one act on the reason. If reasons for action are in fact facts or states of affairs, as Lowe says, how can one act for a reason without having cognitive access to it in the first place and then tying it to one's some state of volition (for example, some state of desiring)?³

¹ Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 29ff.

² He follows Jonathan Dancy to take reasons for action to be facts or states of affairs, which cannot be completely right, in my view. I have no space to discuss the issue in the paper. For a general discussion of reasons for action which is especially focused on my criticism of Dancy, see my *Moral Philosophy and Practical Reason* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2006), chapter 4. For Dancy's externalist view about reasons for action, see Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Lowe does concede that one must be aware of a reason if a reason is to be that for which one acts. However, the

This is not to say that a reason for action can be simply identified with a state of the agent as involved when he is aware of such a reason. For it is surely necessary to hold that reasons for action are, in some epistemic sense, independent of the agent's mental states so that the distinction between rational and irrational actions can be drawn. However, whether an action is rational or not does not merely depend on conceiving of reasons for action in this way; instead it also depends on whether the agent himself is rational in holding a belief and a desire on which he acted. If an agent does not really believe that he has a putative reason for action, for instance, it will be irrational for him to act on that reason. If belief and desire do have different directions of fit so that the essential motivating role which desire has in the generation of an action cannot be replaced by whatever is purely cognitive, it follows that the Humean theory of reasons for action is substantively right.¹ Thus it seems safe to conclude that even if one's belief and desire may not be sufficient for one to act in a certain way, they are at least necessary if one does already take an action.

Lowe may put forward two interrelated objections to what I just said in the above. In the first place, Lowe may argue that to be caused to act in a certain way by certain of one's beliefs and desires is not consistent with one's acting rationally. This is not generally true, however. Suppose I believe that it is desirable to keep my promise to a student to the effect that I shall meet him this afternoon to discuss his essay. Then I take a taxi to go to my office in school. My action is obviously rational. What is at issue is whether it makes sense to say that my action is caused by the belief together with the desire that I want to keep my promise. Answer to the question is 'yes' at least to the extent that some counterfactual analysis of causation is acceptable.² An action can be rational so long as the belief and desire on which one acts are rational. For example, a belief is formed on the basis of some reasons or considerations, and a desire is consistent with one's rational commitment to some values. In this case, it is not necessary, as Lowe insists, to say that one acts 'in the light of' one's belief and desire since saying this is nothing more than saying that one takes oneself to be rational in acting from one's belief and desire. However, even though it is by making reference to the *content* of my belief and desire that why my so acting is *rational* explained, the action would not have happened without, for instance, my *desiring* to keep my promise to a student, and *believing* that by taking a taxi to go to school I would be able to keep my promise. If keeping one's promise is a reason for acting in a certain way, it may be sufficient for explaining the rationality of my action by appealing to the fact that I have made a promise of some form. However, even though I had been aware of this fact, I might have not acted or chosen to act in the specified way because, for example, I did not believe that I could go to school before the assigned time by taking a taxi, given the present traffic situation. It is also possible that I might be unable to establish some connection by deliberation between my aware of the fact (which is, according to Lowe, a reason or can serve as a reason) and my

expression 'being aware of a reason' seems to me too vague to serve the purpose of explaining actions.

¹ For a detailed argument for this point, see Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 101-125. Smith goes further to argue that even normative reasons must be subject to the Humean analysis of reasons for action.

² Lowe does not offer any substantive analysis of causation in the book I am discussing.

motivational system. It seems to me that any reason for *action* must be ultimately analyzed in terms of Bernard Williams' model of internal reasons.¹ Even if it makes sense to say that I act 'in the light of' my beliefs and desires, it is simply because it is 'I' who holds these beliefs and desires, and thus becomes the subject who acts in a certain way.

In the second place, Lowe may argue that any causal theory of action is susceptible to the problem of deviant causal chains, and thus deemed to be inappropriate. The agent-causation approach to action is partly inspired by an attempt to deal with the problem.² However, there is no reason to think that the problem is in principle insolvable.³ In fact, Davidson has suggested the basic idea for solving the problem when he says that "central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason".⁴ In other words, the agent's rationalizations must not be a mere rationalization. In Davidson's view, a mere rationalization by itself "provides no reason for saying that one suitable belief-desire pair rather than another (which may well also have been present in the agent) did the causing".⁵ It is for the reason that Davidson insists that causal relation must be brought into play in order to single out, among the reasons the agent had, the one which was effective in bringing about his behavior. Of course, Davidson does not go on to specify the conditions required to eliminate the deviant cases except by insisting that the effect must be brought about *in the right way*. Given Davidson's commitment to the holism and the normative character of the mental, this is completely intelligible. For the holism and the normative character of the mental implies that there are no strict intentional laws and psychophysical laws. However, specifying conditions for a normal course of events that deviant chains deviate would be amount to establishing such a law. Whether or not Davidson is right in this regard is not what concerns me here. However, it is interesting to note that Lowe is faced with a similar problem. An agent might have been aware of various reasons in acting in a certain way. Thus it is natural to ask for which reason he actually so acted. In response, Lowe cannot say that the reason for which he actually acted was the one that actually *moved* him to so act, namely, the one that *caused* him to so to act. For, in his view, being caused to act by certain of one's beliefs and desires is not acting for a reason. The only answer Lowe can offer to the question is that the reason for which the agent acted is the reason which he *chose* to act upon. In Lowe's words, "by

¹ See Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons", reprinted in Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-113, and Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame", reprinted in Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35-45. For my own interpretation of Williams' notion of internal reasons, see my *Moral Philosophy and Practical Reason*, pp. 193-215.

² See, for example, John Bishop (1983), "Agent-Causation", *Mind* 92: 61-78.

³ For some proposals for solving the problem, see Robert Audi, "Acting for Reason" and Alfred Mele and Paul Moser, "Intentional Action", both reprinted in Alfred Mele (ed.), *The Philosophy of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Alfred Mele (1987), "Intentional Actions and Wayward Causal Chains: The Problem of Tertiary Waywardness", *Philosophical Studies* 51: 55-60; Thalberg (1984), "Do Our Intentions Cause Our Intentional Actions", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21: 249-260. A promising attempt may be made on the basis of Michael Bratman's theory of extended agency.

⁴ Donald Davidson (1963), "Actions, Reasons and Causes", reprinted in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 9.

⁵ Donald Davidson (1987), "Problems in the Explanation of Action", in P. Pettit, R. Sylvan and J. Norman (eds.), *Metaphysics and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 35-49, quoted on p. 42.

choosing to act in a certain way in the light of a given reason, the agent *makes* that reason the reason for which he acted on that occasion”.¹ However, how could the agent choose to act in a certain way in the light of a given reason if not because he had recognized the reason-giving force of the reason? If so, it makes no sense, as I have argued in the above, to say that it is through the agent’s mental act of free choice that he “makes that reason the reason for which he acted”. Even if to choose in the light of a given reason is to choose freely, the understanding of free choice can be accepted by a compatibilist, as I have argued before. On the other hand, suppose that Lowe is to stick to the libertarian conception of free choice so as to insist that even when the agent found himself having no reason to choose to act, or having most reason to choose to act in a certain way, he still could choose to act in a certain way, or have chosen to act otherwise, through his mental act of free choice. Then either Lowe has abandoned the essential connection he deliberately establishes between being free to act and acting for reasons, or he has presupposed the possibility of libertarian free choice without explaining how it is possible.

IV

Central to Lowe’s approach to free agency is the claim that if choices are to play the role Lowe assigns to them in rational action, they must be uncaused and thus free in the libertarian sense. Lowe makes two crucial moves to argue in support of the claim. In the first place, he argues that acting for a reason is not caused to act. In the second place, he goes on to argue that if a choice had been actually made, it was made by the agent through exercising the agent’s power of choice in the light of a final reason. Then appeal to reasons in choice-making seems to serve to show why an uncaused action—in Lowe’s case, typically, the action of making a choice by exercising one’s power of choice—is free and yet not a merely chancy occurrence. In this way Lowe seems, as he takes it, to avoid the problem of luck with which other agent-causation theorists have been faced.

However, Lowe would have to pay some price to make the strategy of argument to work. To act for a reason is supposed to act completely through exercising the agent’s own agency, in spite of the causal influence imposed by prior events on the agent, which captures a sense in which action can be free. However, if being free to act just consists, as it seems according to Lowe, in acting out of the agent’s rational recognition of the practical necessity of so acting, it is not clear, in the very least, why a compatibilist cannot accept the understanding of freedom. In fact, I suspect that when attempting to explain the possibility of free choice in this way, Lowe seems to have confused autonomy with free will. But most libertarians are quite unwilling to identify free will with autonomy while at least some compatibilists welcome the identification.² On the other hand, if Lowe argues that the agent still could have chosen otherwise even when the agent had been aware of the practical necessity of choosing in a certain way, he is assuming without argument that libertarian freedom is

¹ Lowe, *Personal Agency*, p. 183.

² For an account of why free will is a different matter from autonomy, see Marina A. L. Oshana, “Autonomy and Free Agency”, especially pp. 184-192.

already possible. It does not suffice to establish the possibility in question merely by appealing to the phenomenology of choosing since we can, as I have argued in the above, have experience of free choice even when living a completely deterministic world. Moreover, if Lowe's account of free agency is essentially based on the idea of acting for reasons, it is unclear what role the notion of agent-causation is supposed to play in his approach. The 'I' as the subject of agency is indeed ineliminable from the first-personal point of view in the generation of any action. But this does not show that agent-causation cannot be further explained in terms of the fact that it is because the agent entertains a certain reason and recognizes the reason-giving force of the reason through deliberation that the agent chooses to act in the way in which the agent did. Nor does Lowe's account of the alleged primacy of substance-causation succeed in showing that it must be the case.

Despite my critique of Lowe, it does not imply that there are no plausible ideas implicit in his approach to free agency. Lowe has certainly made an important advance in relating the idea of being free to act/choose to that of acting/choosing for reasons. This seems to me on the right track if any adequate understanding of human freedom must take into account the value of being free, which cannot simply consist in being able to choose even when there is no reason to choose. If acting for a reason can be, as I believe, taken to mean acting through recognizing the reason-giving of this reason, then such an action can be free in the sense that the ground for performing the action is originated from the agent. This seems to be Lowe's view. However, it is also clear that the understanding of free agency does not necessarily rule out the case in which the agent can be free in acting from some of the agent's beliefs and desires to the extent that the agent has rationally endorsed the belief and desire on which the agent acted. Without such reflective endorsement, it would be impossible that the agent can be said to free to act even in acting from a reason. This is so especially because Lowe endorses Jonathan Dancy's externalist theory of reasons for acting. This seems to me quite odd since he is apparent to insist on some connection between being free to choose and being autonomous, no matter whether he is right in doing so. Since we live in such a world in which we are everywhere and anytime subject to causal impacts from it, it is mistaken and unnatural to assume that there is some absolute separation between 'the space of causes' and 'the space of reasons', and go on to claim *a priori* that only acting for a reason can be free *because* so acting is uncaused. It is more proper to say that we come to learn to act in the light of reasons in such a way that we gradually escape from the mere causal determination of our actions by prior events. However, it is not that we can be free by choosing, through some mysterious power of choice, not to be subject to such causal influence since we are in fact subject to such influence. Instead it is that we can be free because we are capable of deciding how to act or whether or not to act on the basis of our rational deliberations. Determinism may make libertarian freedom impossible. But what is at issue is whether we must accept the libertarian conception of freedom in order to have the freedom we do value as living in the real world. The conclusion is that we do not have to.

